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ABSTRACT

Few children possess the knowledge and experience to identify the best books from the numbers that flood the market, so it is wise for authors, publishers, librarians, teachers, and parents to be aware of any body of informed critical opinion regarding excellence in books for children. The contribution of the conscientious critic is as valuable to the advancement of literature as is the contribution of the conscientious author. Criticism of children's literature focuses on three main aspects: high literary standards, the child as consumer and audience, and issues such as sexism, racism, or ethnic images. A search for critical viewpoints of children's books for the period of 1969-1979 found an extensive and impressive body of criticism of children's literature. The nature, scope, and authority of the writings were also convincing. Accessible in style and format to laymen as well as experts, these writings covered a variety of subjects, adopted a number of critical stances, and included popular and scholarly approaches. The criticism appears to be moving away from a narrow preoccupation with text, toward a more comprehensive criticism that embraces the author, the work, the social environment, and the audience. (Discussion of many of the works from each critical category is included.) (HTH)

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Children's Literature - The Search for Excellence

by

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St. John's

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It was Saturday morning and I was browsing in the juvenile section of a local book store. The selection was not extremely large but there were some books by widely recognized authors and illustrators; there were some that bore the gold medal of merit; there were some that carried the yellow seal of the Children's Book Centre. I was engrossed in an examination of Arnold Lobel's Fables when I became aware of a conversation going on behind me. Without really intending to eavesdrop, I found myself listening to an exchange between two ladies who were also studying the children's books - at least one of them was. She was obviously a fond grandmother intent on finding an appropriate birthday gift for her grandson. The lady accompanying her was a friend, perhaps less book-conscious, who had other errands to do and was beginning to show some signs of impatience at the long delay in the book store.

"Haven't you found a suitable one yet?", she asked, after making another sweeping circuit of the small store. "Surely he hasn't read all of these!"

"No," the grandmother admitted, "but there are so many of those Hardy Boys books and he has a lot already. He's collecting them. The trouble is they all look alike to me. I don't know which ones he has read."

"Well, does it have to be one of the Hardy Boys books, then, if it is so hard to decide?", her friend replied. "There must be something else you can choose from all of these." "Anyway," she added, as an afterthought, "does it matter much which one you get him? They all seem to be about the same price. After all, he's only a child."

"No. I don't suppose it matters all that much," the grandmother agreed. "He's only eight." But then, rather wistfully, she added, "I wanted to get him something really good, though. I suppose I should have brought him in with me and let him choose for himself. He knows what he likes better than I do."

By this time I became acutely aware that I was intently listening to a conversation which did not concern me. Not only was I listening, I was about to become involved. My good breeding surfaced, however, and somewhat reluctantly I turned away, but I have been unable to forget the episode and it frequently returns to haunt me. Perhaps it is not strange; it may be some sort of exorcism, that I feel impelled to share it with you at the beginning of this paper entitled "Children's Literature - The Search for Excellence."

Note, if you will, some rather significant ideas in that episode - thought-provoking ideas, well worth pondering:

> "Does it <u>have</u> to be one of the Hardy Boys?
> There must be something else you can choose."
> "Does it <u>matter</u> which one you get him? They
> are all about the same <u>price</u>. After all, he's
> only a <u>child</u>."

and

> I wanted to get him something really <u>good</u>.
> I should have let him <u>choose for himself</u>.
> He <u>knows what he likes</u> better than I do.

There are, as I believe you will very readily see, some extremely interesting implications in these comments - implications which we do not have the time to explore fully in the present context. Does it really matter what kind of book we provide for children? They <u>are</u> mere children, their memory span is brief, they will forget most of what they read. After all, there is a difference between a mere

child and a discriminating adult. Is it really so, that children are always able to choose wisely for themselves? On what do they base their choices? Can we really assume that children's own choices will naturally be 'best' for them? The weight of the evidence would certainly suggest otherwise. Is it really true that it doesn't matter what children read, for one of those days they will grow up, and then, by some strange phenomenon, they will develop literary taste; they will become sensitive to beauty of language and style; they will appreciate well-structured, carefully developed plots; they will draw satisfaction from worthwhile themes; and they will respond positively to multi-dimensional characters whose lives extend their own? Taste for good literature, like taste in music or art, for example, develops and is likely to be a product of exposure and experience. Herein lies the importance of the book experiences we provide for children, and herein lies the significance of the careful selection of the books we make available to children. Now selection implies some evaluation and decision-making based upon a sound knowledge of books and a knowledge of the audience for whom the books are being selected. Hence, we are back to the topic which provides the focus for this paper: Children's Literature - The Search for Excellence or Children's Literature and Criticism.

Children are rarely the ones who choose the books purchased for them and, even if they are, it appears reasonable to assume that few children possess the knowledge and experience to identify the best books from the numbers that flood the market. It therefore behooves authors, publishers, librarians, teachers, and parents to be aware of, and sensitive to, any body of informed critical opinion regarding the

nature of excellence in books for children. Indeed, all who believe that it is important to bring children and good books together in a profitable and pleasurable encounter must be concerned with both the nature of the reader and the quality of the literature.

Literature of excellence is always likely to be associated with a strong and comprehensive criticism, for literature, like all the other arts, is nurtured in a climate of sound critical judgement. Miller (1946) affirms that the arts flourish where such a climate of critical opinion exists, and in the absence of such a nurturing climate Cranby (1967) suggests that both the work and the artist will degenerate. Ivan Southall, distinguished Australian author of such books as Josh, Let the Ballon Go, Ash Road, and Hill's End, argues very convincingly that the contribution of the conscientious critic is as valuable to the advancement of literature as is that of the conscientious writer. The author, in his creative efforts to produce a work of some significance, "bares his soul," Southall explains, and he maintains that any critic who is desirous of fulfilling a constructive function can do no less. Since the author and the critic are both engaged in the continuing search for excellence, both have mutual need for each other, Southall insists; the contribution of the one is no less important than that of the other, and, for both, integrity is the ultimate truth. (p. 414) This is true of children's literature as it is true of literature generally, and the steady growth of a distinctive children's literature has been inextricably linked to the constant demand for standards.

Concern for a valid criticism of children's literature is not a new development, nor is the demand for standards in children's books

a product of this century. Certainly, a milestone in the early literary criticism of children's books appeared anonymously in The Quarterly Review in England in 1844 (in Haviland, p. 8). In what must have been among the first survey articles to deal exclusively with writing for children, the author, later identified as Elizabeth Rigby, spoke out boldly against the spate of unimaginative and didactic literature being written for children. The expressed purpose of her article is in the best tradition of literary criticism in any period, whether 1844 or 1982:

> We should be happy if, by calling attention to the real excellence and beauty of a genuine child's book, we could assist in raising the standard of the art itself - the only effective way, it seems to us, of checking the torrent of dressed up trumpery which is now poured upon the public.
>
> (p. 18)

On this side of the Atlantic the critical essays of Anne Carroll Moore have been credited with establishing books for children "on an equal footing with the literature of the adult world," (in Moore, 1961), and Frances Clarke Sayers identified in Moore the characteristics of a genuine critic:

> long and close association with writers, illustrators and publishers; a knowledge and love of both children and books; an intellectual discipline and discernment; and a clear concept of the function of a critic.
>
> (p. 14)

Moore herself declared that "standards of appraisal consistently applied to the consideration of children's books as holding a place in contemporary fiction, was unknown in 1918." (p. 2) Richard Darling (1968), however, in his comprehensive study of the reviewing of children's books in the United States during the period 1865-1881, discovered that in that country serious criticism of children's books

had indeed begun before the end of the nineteenth century. According to Darling, the criticism was almost entirely the work of reviewers who had respect for children's books as a part of literature and were sensitive to the new trends of the period.

Whatever the precise chronological details may be, there can be little doubt that by the end of the first quarter of this century children's literature on both sides of the Atlantic had become well established as a commodity deserving of critical study. This notwithstanding, in 1971 distinguished British author and critic John Rowe Townsend described children's literature as being "barely discussible at a respectable intellectual level." In his Arbuthnot Honor lecture entitled "Standards of Criticism in Children's Literature," Townsend claimed that, in order for children's books to be disassociated from "kiddy lit" and all the connotations implied by that "squirmy term," and taken seriously as literature, they must be considered "with critical strictness." (p. 282) He concluded that at that time there was little writing which could be dignified with the name of criticism. (p. 378) It must be noted that Townsend was writing in 1971. It should also be noted that he made a distinction between criticism on the one hand and reviews, aids to book selection, and general surveys on the other.

Lillian Gerhardt (1973), editor of School Library Journal and also of Issues in Children's Book Selection (1973), attributed the dearth of critical writing about books for children in the United States to the continuous oversupply which she considers to be "the greatest deterrent to effective criticism in any art form." She also identified as a contributing cause to the lack of literary criticism,

the low status accorded the teaching of children's literature. Teachers of children's literature, she maintained, are generally practicing librarians and not full-time faculty members, and they lack both the time and the motivation to produce scholarly critical writing.

In the present context - a Conference of the Canadian Council of Teachers of English - it is interesting to record that in the spring of 1975 Canadian Children's Literature: A Journal of Criticism and Review began publication. In the first editorial, its purpose was identified:

> Canadian Children's Literature is meant to serve those who guide children's reading in schools, in libraries, at home... CCL will provide both authoritative articles and in-depth reviews of Canadian children's literature... Aids to teaching, analysis of authorial values and biases, essential criticism: these will be a few of CCL's concerns.
>
> (p. 6)

The editorial states the intention of the publication: "We intend to participate in the continuing growth of Canadian Children's Literature, while providing an essential commentary on its development as a whole." (p. 6)

Any assessment of either the quantity or the quality of the current criticism of children's literature must be determined, at least in part, by one's definition of criticism. Townsend (1971), we noted earlier, distinguished between criticism and reviews, books selection aids, and general surveys. Gerhardt (1973) refers to critical essays, and maintains that "children's librarians have, perforce, become reviewers, without the time to become critics." (p. vii) Criticism may manifest itself in many forms, however, and in a sense we are all

critics, for as Paul Heins (1970) suggests, "Every time we pass judgement on a book or express enthusiasm for it, we are engaging in a critical act." (p. 265) But "different forms of assessments are valid for different purposes," as Townsend (1971) observed. What is of importance is not so much the form which the criticism takes but its purpose and its nature. Whoever the critics are, the form, the style, and the quality of the critical statement will be largely shaped by the purpose it is designed to serve and the audience for which it is intended.

CATEGORIES OF CRITICISM

Although criticism, in one form or another, has for a century or so now been applied to books for children, Meek, Warlow and Barton (1978) believe that the critics fall generally into two main categories:

> There are those who undertake...'stern critical appraisal according to high literary standards on behalf of the discerning adult'...And there are those who look at children's literature on behalf of the child, trying to understand his needs and advising parents and teachers accordingly.
>
> (p. 263)

This is worthy of note, since we have here in this comment the idea of a traditional work-centred or literary criticism and also a child-centred criticism, an approach to criticism with a focus on the child as consumer or audience. In 1973, after the turbulent 60's, Gerhardt identified another category of criticism - one focusing on the analysis of racism, sexism, and ethnic images. (p. ix) Concern with fiction as a medium of propaganda has, she believes, recently taken priority over concern for those qualities of excellence so central to the consideration of any art form. (p. ix) Her list of concerns was expanded by

Granstrom and Silvey (in MacCann and Woodard, 1977), who refer to the 'isms' currently assailing children's books:

> feminism, sexism, racism, and even middle-class white Americanism; and most of the voices of protest are those of America's minority groups. It seems to a time for change, but also a time to pause, to reflect, to exercise considered judgment.
>
> (p. 97)

Much of the criticism of children's literature falls into these three categories which may be identified as work-centred, child-centred, and issues-centred. Egoff, Stubbs and Ashley (1969), in Only Connect, followed a work-centred approach to criticism when they included in their collection of readings only those articles which dealt with children's literature "as an essential part of the whole realm of literary activity, to be discussed in the same terms and judged by the same standards that would apply to any other branch of writing". (p. xv) In The Cool Web: The Pattern of Children's Reading (1978), however, the emphasis has shifted from the work to the reader. It is indeed this change in emphasis which Meek, Warlow and Barton offer as justification for the collection. They explain:

> It would be difficult to justify another collection of essays such as this unless it opened up a way forward from the minority cult which children's literature can so easily become if the authors and the critics, mutually sustaining as they are, lose sight of the readers.
>
> (p. 4)

But whether the focus is on the work as a representation of the arts, the writer as artist, the reader as audience, or the subject matter as social issues, there is no mistaking the importance of a

valid literary criticism in directing the development of children's literature. There is always need for the type of criticism of which Cornelia Meigs (1969) writes:

> There is still need for more penetrating and knowledgable criticism, which estimates the quality of a book in relation to what it is rather than to what it is not; which dwells upon significances, not upon trivialities; which considers a book in its totality, rather than allows a minor aspect to distract the whole; which is authoritative in its perspective of the past and its knowledge of the present.
>
> (p. 389)

I should like, in the balance of this paper, to share with you some of the major findings of a study of the criticism of children's books over a period of a decade. The study was undertaken by me in response to Townsend's conclusion that little or no such criticism of children's books existed. It was designed to explore the state of the art of the criticism of children's literature and to seek answers related to such criticism and the nature, score, and categorization of the same.

The period under review was 1969-1979, and the sources examined for evidence of critical viewpoint were books and general periodicals, as well as a purposive sample of periodicals of the library and teaching professions. Reviews were not included. The sample was chosen to include American, British, and Canadian representation, and all sources were examined for evidence of critical viewpoints, categories of criticism, and developing trends.

The choice of the particular period 1969-1979 was not arbitrary. Since the study was concerned with the present state of the art, it was imperative to make the study as current as possible. As

well, there was some indication that the period 1969-79 might be an eventful one to study. The beginning of this decade was marked by the publication of a collection of essays and articles on children's literature edited by three Canadian educators. Egoff, Stubbs, and Ashley (1969) claimed that no previous collection of writings on children's literature had been characterized by such diversity, nor had there been heretofore such a broad representation of writers from both sides of the Atlantic. In selecting items for inclusion, the editors were unequivocal in their assertion that children's literature is a part of all literature and must be judged by the same standards as are applied to all literature. They rejected any idea of a special scale of values for children's books. Their emphasis is on the work itself and their avowed purpose is to make accessible a body of critical writing related to children's literature. Toward the end of the decade another collection of works appeared, again with representation from Great Britain and North America. Meeks, Warlow, and Barton (1978) were still concerned with children and their reading but the main focus of attention had changed from the work to the reader. The study attempted to discover whether such a shift in emphasis is generally apparent in the critical and evaluative work of the period.

Also, in the period proposed for study, the existence of any body of critical writing related to children's books had been seriously questioned. Both Townsend (1971) and Gerhardt (1973) identified the lack of a serious criticism as a contributory factor to the intellectual confusion surrounding children's literature.

Because of the overwhelming volume of the reviews of children's books in the decade 1969-1979, no attempt was made to

include reviews in the major sources of information. This decision was pragmatic rather than philosophical, although the status of the review as a form of criticism is the subject of debate. The review, regarded by many as journalism rather than criticism, may be and often is informative, narrative, and descriptive, rather than critical and evaluative. Admittedly, reviews may vary in style, purpose, and critical perceptiveness, and they do make accessible a body of information which, for many, may constitute the only form of criticism available. Also, they provide a useful source of information for those involved in the selection of books for children. For these reasons, their exclusion has been noted as a limitation of the study. A survey of the reviewing of children's books in the period under study may well be the subject of another study.

In the context of this study, criticism was deemed to be writings which in whole or in part were concerned with some aspect of the nature, function, or quality of literature. The critic was any individual whose writings, of a critical or evaluative nature, had been published either in the books or the periodical literature examined. While it is recognized that a diversity of reasons may prompt an individual to make critical statements, it was assumed, for purposes of this study, that the best-informed critical opinion is likely to appear in the professional literature. Such professional literature provided a large part of the sources for this study.

The study sought answers to six questions:

1. What evidence is there of the existence of a body of critical and evaluative writing associated with children's literature?

2. To what extent is it possible to categorize such

critical and evaluative writing as work-centred, child-centred, and issues-centred?

3. Who are the critics?

4. How comprehensive is the criticism which does exist, and what is the present state of the art?

5. What are the prevailing principles emerging from an examination of the critical writing?

6. What evidence is there of shifting emphasis in the criticism of children's literature within the past decade?

PRIMARY FINDINGS

This study provides convincing evidence of the existence of an extensive and quite impressive body of criticism of children's literature. Although it exists often in fragments and in a variety of sources, the criticism is unified by a prevailing concern for the preservation of high literary standards in a distinctive children's literature. Collectively, it addresses the nature of literature itself, the nature of the child, and the nature of society. It adopts and defends a balanced approach to children's literature, an approach in which the primary concern for literary excellence is sufficiently broad to embrace a concern for both the child reader and the social setting. Firmly rooted in such landmarks of the past as Hazard's Books, Children and Men and Smith's The Unreluctant Years, the criticism of the decade under study moves beyond these to reflect increased emphasis on the developmental nature of childhood and to address the impact upon literature of contemporary social issues. The evidence of the study is that the criticism of children's literature is coming of age. No longer can the term "kitty lit" be applied with any justification to a distinguished branch of literature which is accepted as a discipline worthy of study and research in University Departments of

English Education, and Library Science, a discipline which has its own scholarly associations, its own reviewing periodicals, its own critical journals, and a growing body of criticism which may be both formalized and structured.

The evidence does not, however, reside entirely in the volume of the critical writings. The nature, the scope, and the authority of the writings are also convincing. They cover a variety of subjects, adopt a number of critical stances, include both popular and scholarly approaches, are accessible in style and format to layman as well as expert, and contain much that may be described as high-caliber criticism. The criticism appears in popular and professional journals, and in general as well as specialized sources. It is included in reference sources, in omnibus surveys, in full-length books, and in edited collections of public lectures and conference papers. Two significant developments during the decade have been the publication of collections of previously published items from a variety of sources, and the appearance of a number of specialized periodicals devoted exclusively to the study and criticism of children's literature. Such collections as Only Connect: Readings on Children's Literature (Oxford: 1969, 1980), Issues in Children's Book Selection (Bowker: 1973), Writers, Critics and Children (Agathon Press, 1976), Cross Currents of Criticism (The Horn Book, 1977) and The Cool Web: The Pattern of Children's Reading (Atheneum, 1978), and such periodicals as Signal: Approaches to Children's Books (1970 -), Children's Literature in Education (1970 -), Children's Literature: The Great Excluded (1972 -) and Canadian Children's Literature: A Journal of Criticism and Review (1975 -) will serve to illustrate these developments.

The body of critical writing examined, as was intimated earlier, appears to fall rather naturally into three major categories - work-centred, child-centred, and issue-centred. These categories are not mutually exclusive, for there are critical concerns which transcend any single category to address the wholeness of the literary creation. All three approaches are unified by a common emphasis on the need for literary merit in children's books, regardless of the subject matter.

The criticism identified as work-centred is extensive. Soundly based on scholarship, and drawing on the traditionally accepted conventions of literary art, it emphasizes the relative importance in children's books of plot, setting, character, theme, and style. It explores the nature of each literary genre and identifies touchstones by which new works may be assessed. While it is impossible in this time frame to do more than give this type of brief overview, perhaps it might be useful if I were to give a few illustrative examples.

With reference to the literature of the oral tradition, for example, the existing criticism, though sparse, is quite thought-provoking. This genre includes the myths, legends, fables, folktales, fairy tales, epics, romances, and any other forms which may derive from the collective tales of a community. Its origin often obscure, this literature has been transmitted across the generations by the "artless art" of the storyteller, and has only relatively recently been "fixed" by written records. Originally the literature of the folk, it was for children only in the sense that children were a part of the folk audience, but it made no concessions to their immaturity or lack of experience. Versions designed for children are therefore several

removes from the original tales, since they are retellings or adaptations of the transcriptions or translations of these tales. And there are versions or variants of adaptations or retellings, even variants of adaptations or retellings, even variants of variants, and the process continues until, in the numbers of versions for children that abound, it is sometimes difficult to sense any trace of the original sources, or of the 'folk' themselves. Thus, the multiplicity of versions and variants, some of which are very far removed from the 'truth' or 'rightness' of the tale, threaten to destroy for children the wonder, richness, and beauty of this traditional literature.

The criticism reminds us that versions of traditional literature for children must be rooted firmly in folklore and in classical literature; they must preserve and transmit the spirit, the flavour, and the very atmosphere of the environment in which the tales evolved; conventions, techniques, and styles must be those which are natural to folk literature; the language, whether it is rich and embellished, or stark and direct, must be appropriate and must communicate an authenticity; individually, as well as collectively, these versions must convey the "essence" of place, period, and people.

The criticism reminds those of us who select folk literature for children that 'versions' which 'prettify' the folk tales to make them palatable for younger and younger children may serve only to emasculate these tales, so that they are little more than a travesty of folk literature; and that to falsify folk literature in form, theme, language, style, or in any other manner, is to deny its origins,

distort its nature and intent, and effectively destroy it as a genre of literature.

In the criticism of historical fiction, the guidelines are clear. Historical fiction for children, as for adults, recreates the past. It does so through a good story in which action and adventure result from a successful blending of fact and fiction, and in which historical fiction is used in the service of narrative. The subject matter is the past, vastly rich in potential; the tale lives largely through the credibility of the characters who represent both the historically eminent, and those for whom there are no entries in historical references. Accuracy and authenticity are preserved, but never at the expense of artistic presentation. The primary criterion for language is that it gives the impression of a period, and sounds right in its context. The point of view of the novel must reflect the social manners and mores of the time period, but the author will bring to his story his own interpretation of facts. The historical background must be supplied sensitively, particularly for young children, and in this regard the importance of the illustrations cannot be over-estimated. The author has a responsibility to preserve the moral order by engaging the reader's sympathy for the victims of social injustice and by recording in some convincing way - through plot and character - a disapproval of social practices which, in the perspective of the present, are unacceptable to a majority of civilized people. Acknowledging such writers as Rosemary Sutcliff, Esther Forbes, and Hester Burton to be the models against which achievement in historical fiction must be assessed, Egoff (1975) concludes that historical fiction for children in Canada is a "succession of failures." (p. 98) Its virtue is the

accurate reporting of historical facts, she claims; its failure is literary. In Egoff's opinion, Canadian authors of historical fiction have not been successful in achieving the balance between authenticity and art which is the hallmark of excellence. In this failure they are members of a large company of writers who employ more skill in reporting history than in recreating it. It should be noted that this statement of Egoff's was made prior to the publication of Smucker's Underground to Canada (Clark Irwin, 1977) and Days of Terror (Clark Irwin, 1979), both of which have received some critical acclaim. It was also made prior to the publication of the Northern Light Series, which attempts to make Canadian history live for younger readers. It would be interesting to assess individual books in that series by the guidelines established in the critical writing. Doubtless, every attempt has been made to ensure their historical accuracy; the quality of their imaginative recreation is open to question.

Time will obviously not permit me to examine each genre which is dealt with in the category of criticism which I have labelled work-centred. Before leaving this category, however, I should like to make brief reference to non-fiction and picture-books - both forms that are proliferating greatly. While there is no suggestion that all informational books are literature, there is a strong suggestion in the criticism that no sharp dividing line may be drawn between fiction and non-fiction. A fresh colourful and original approach, combined with interesting and imaginative writing and careful attention to form, style and structure, are just as important to a work of non-fiction as they are to fictional writings. The information communicated should be marked by accuracy, authenticity, clarity, currency, and objectivity,

with fact and theory clearly distinguishable. The author's personal bias should be made explicit, and children should be made aware that no author is omniscient; that the search for knowledge is continuous; that today's 'truth' may be incomplete; that children themselves may be a part of the search for understanding. First-class informational books engage children in such a search. Devoid of didactic arrogance, they will reflect an author's enthusiasm for the subject and will foster ideals of scholarship and a scholarly approach. Of critical importance, also, are the logical organization and arrangement of the information; the use of illustrations that are clearly and directly captioned; the use of additional features such as a table of contents, an index, a bibliography of sources consulted, and a glossary of terms. There is also in the criticism a strong suggestion that a valid criticism of informational books, even more so than that of books of fiction, must consider the child along with the work in relating the use of language and the embedding of facts in language to the cognitive level of the audience. With reference to the picture book, two interesting concerns surface in the criticism. There is the concern that wordless picture books, which contain no literary experience, appear increasingly to be considered as literature; there is also a grave concern that within the picture-book form generally, the marvels of modern graphic techniques threaten to subordinate that text of a picture book to its art; and that a preoccupation with colour may so dazzle illustrators and critics that they become insensitive to genuine artistic attributes. Unfortunately, the 'art' of the picture book often receives little criticism.

The criticism classified as child-centred is small in quantity, but thought-provoking in substance. It seeks to establish a relationship between the disciplines of literature and psychology, a relationship which is reinforced by the findings of both formal research and empirical observation. Norma Schlager (1978), for example, emphasizes the need for "cross-polination" between the two disciplines in an attempt to relate knowledge of child development to children's literary inclinations. Based on her study of the five most popular Newbery award-winning books and the five least-popular ones, she concluded that literary quality alone will not ensure child interest in books. Books which are to appeal to childhood must have the developmental perceptions of childhood. She attributes the popularity of O'Dell's The Island of the Blue Dolphins, for example, to its possession of just such perceptions, while Shannon's Dobry, lacking the same, has never captivated children.

In this regard, reference should be made to the publication, Children's Choices of Canadian Books, Vols. 1 and 2. My guess is that an examination of these volumes will reveal much evidence to support Schlager's conclusion. To quote one example only, from Vol. 1, p. 74, Edith Sharp's Nkwala is included as an adult favourite, with the seal of approval of adult critics. Those of you who know the book will, I believe, agree that it is beautifully written. Winner of the Little, Brown Canadian Children's Book Award, the Canadian Governor General's Award, and a Diploma of Merit, Hans Christian Anderson Honor List, this book has nevertheless not been overwhelmingly popular with children. According to Children's Choices of Canadian Books, "Readers' reaction to this book was not good. Most, in all ages, found it hard to

finish..." I wonder why. The reason for its lack of popularity has nothing to do with literary excellence, I suggest.

The child-centred criticism calls attention to a rather ironical situation which may be developing in children's literature, one in which a constant emphasis on literary standards is resulting in books of excellence which are accessible to only an elitist minority. Spencer-Meek (in Hunter-Grundin and Grundin, 1978) speaks of the importance of finding the fit between text and message. She links children's literature with the child's developing ability to read, and maintains that it is the difficulty of the text, the appropriateness of the message that it carries, and the relationship of the one to the other that should be the object of critical concern.

A strong principle emerging from the small body of critical writings which focus on the child as well as the literature, is that authors must write for the many as well as the few, and that literature of excellence must be accessible to all children. Both authors and critics must take into account the nature of child growth and development, for to do otherwise is to deny both the nature of children and the existence of a distinctive children's literature. The implications here for all of us who choose books for children will, I believe, be obvious.

The rather substantial body of criticism categorized as issues-centred deals with the appropriate presentation in books for children of the issues and 'isms' of contemporary society. The criticism addresses both the general question of the legitimacy of the subject matter, and the honesty, integrity, and artistry of the presentation. Specifically, the issues and 'isms' which surfaced with

some frequency in the critical literature may be identified as RACISM, SEXISM, HANDICAPISM, AGEISM, THE NEW REALISM, VIOLENCE, ENVIRONMENTAL CONTROL. Agreeing that authors of children's books cannot morally ignore the social milieu in which children live and the social issues which are an important part of the setting in which the narratives are cast, the critics emphasize that social issues and literary excellence are not mutually incompatible. The weight of the criticism is that, regardless of the subject matter, works of literature must be evaluated not as social commentary but as literature; and that the use of art, either literary or graphic, to inculcate or foster intolerance and misunderstanding is unacceptable. This is so, regardless of the author's intention. The critics are unanimous in denouncing stereotyping in any form. There is, however, a strong opinion that the authentic portrayal of social history should not be perceived as stereotyping. It is dishonest to rewrite the past in terms of today's values, and the author's responsibility is to report accurately the social situation - past or present. The author may, however, by a judiciously placed comment, indicate some disapproval of unacceptable philosophy or practice, and thus restore the moral order. While it is not unanimously accepted by the critics, there is a strong current of opinion that meritorious writing on any subject is not necessarily related to the colour or ethnic background of the author, and that the choice of subject matter, form, and style must remain the author's prerogative. The critical opinion, for example, that only blacks should write about blacks, or only Indians should write about Indians, or only the handicapped should write about the handicapped, does not receive strong support in the critical literature. Heins (1972) brings critical perspective and

focus to this confused and emotion-ridden controversy. Experience alone cannot make a competent writer or illustrator, he argues, for "authenticity needs the support of skill." All artists, regardless of their color, culture or political persuasion, must rely upon "the power of the image, the word and the story to engage the attention - as well as the interest and the pleasure - of their audience." (p. 335) The emerging principle is that excellence in writing, as in any form of art, is where it can be found, regardless of the colour of the skin or the texture of the hair of the author. Obviously, time will not permit me now to discuss in detail the critical viewpoints pertaining to each of the 'isms' and issues; indeed, it may be observed that many of the critical principles which apply to one issue may apply equally to others. I should like, however, to focus briefly on sexism, the new realism, violence, and environmental control.

Experimental studies and empirical observations all attest to the prevalence of sexism in children's books, that boys are written about more than girls, that there is an imbalance in the frequency with which males and females occupy leading roles, that males and females, both as children and adults, are depicted in traditional sex roles, and that even the award-winning books are not free of sex bias. Problems related to language, stereotypic presentation of characters, the confusion between genuine criticism and political propaganda, and the relative emphasis on authenticity and aestheticism all apply to sexism in children's literature as they do to racism. Sexist language serves to exclude as well as to trivialize and stereotype females, it is true, but the general problem of stereotyping as it applies to males is as

serious as it is to females - it may be even more serious because it is less often recognized. The critics agree that the stereotypic depiction of male or female characters - either positively or negatively - is unacceptable. They caution, however, against the distortion of historical authenticity. Authors of children's books may not rewrite the circumstances of the past; contemporary books, nevertheless, must not be restricted to the traditional sex-roles, but must reflect the philosophy of present-day society. The critics caution, also, against a zealous feminism that seeks to place literature in the service of personal persuasion rather than in the service of art, or seeks to make literature primarily a vehicle of a social consciousness. Any such approach will effectively move children's books from the realm of literature to the province of propaganda. Characters, both male and female, must be portrayed as individuals, not as representatives of their sex; members of both sexes must be treated as people, with the focus on a shared humanity rather than on gender differences. While alternative life-styles belong in the literature, traditional sex-roles are no less legitimate. Authors must have the freedom to develop their narratives around male protagonists or female ones, as the occasion dictates, and a book which is poorly written is a poor book, regardless of the gender of the main character. Authors must also have the right to portray members of both sexes negatively or positively without being subject to charges of sexism, as long as the portrayal is honest and develops naturally. Literary excellence must never be assessed in terms of the relative number of male and female characters included in a work; nor must sound literary judgement ever be confused with political expediency.

The critics have been consistent in their attempts to increase public awareness of the sexism inherent in certain linguistic practices. No one seriously maintains that there is a dialect that is specifically male or female. The critical issue in sexist language is the more basic one of the recognition of a feminine gender. The Council on Interracial Books for Children (1976) declares that the language problem as it relates to sexism is even greater than is the case with racism. Whereas 'Blackness' may be equated with badness in racist writing, womanhood disappears completely in sexist writing, they maintain. (p. 13) The Council objects to the frequent use of such words as he, man, mankind, or the average man to refer to both male and female. They speak of the 'built-in sexism' which appears in words such as salesman, repairman, mailman, manpower and brotherhood. They charge that women are constantly made to appear as human baggage in such expressions as 'man and wife' or "Daddy took the family to ...," and they reject the inferences in such statements as "Each citizen must pay his taxes" or "a good nurse cares about her patients' feelings." (p. 13) This position of the Council is echoed by most of those who address the subject, though it is generally stated less dramatically. There is, however, a note of caution sounded by those who fear the inherent danger of extremist positions. One well-established critic and author who sounds this note of caution will, I expect, be known to all of you through her A Wrinkle in Time, A Swiftly Tilting Planet, the Austin books, and many others. Addressing the subject in her Walking on Water: Reflections on Faith and Art (1980), Madeleine L'Engle says:

> I am a female, of the species, man. Genesis is very explicit that it takes both male and female to make the image of God, and that the generic word,

> man, includes both. "God created man in his own image, male and female." That is Scripture, therefore I refuse to be timid about being part of mankind. We of the female sex are half of mankind, and it is pusillanimous to reason to he/she him/her or even worse, android words. I have a hunch that those who would do so have forgotten their rightful heritage.
>
> (p. 36)

Maintaining that we are at present in a state of intense sexual confusion, both in life and language, L'Engle suggests that language is a living thing; it is characterized by change. It evolves on its own. It does not do well, she suggests, when it is subjected to arbitrary control. To substitute person for man, she maintains, has ruined what used to be a good, theological word, calling up the glory of God's image within us. Now, at best, it's a joke. She describes the use of words such as chairperson or chair as humiliating and embarassing. (p. 43) Of such attempts at equality between the sexes, she says:

> No. It won't do. This is not equality. Perhaps we should drop the word woman altogether, and use man, recognizing that we need both male and female to be whole. And perhaps, if we ever have real equality with all our glorious differences, the language itself will make the appropriate changes.
>
> (p. 45)

Whatever one's personal reaction to L'Engle's statement may be - and I am sure there are many who will disagree strenuously - the fact remains that the language of literature cannot be prescribed. While sensitive authors must share the awareness and the valid concerns of the feminist critics, they alone must choose the language which will best serve their artistic intentions. The author, neither insensitive to the worth and the dignity of every individual, whether female or male, nor intimidated by extremist views which would place literature

in the service of personal persuasion, must exercise aesthetic as well as social judgement. It will serve neither the cause of art nor society if, in defence of non-sexist language, authors adopt a he/she approach or stultify their style with non-sexist vocabulary.

It is, I believe, important to remember, when responding to the demands that are sometimes being made on children's books, that books designed primarily to promote feminism, or any other cause, must be subject to the rigid critical assessment that all books deserve. The cause of sexism - and the cause of all other valid social issues - will be best served in books for children when well-conceived and carefully executed plots, credible characterizations, and appropriate settings and themes all combine with a captivating style to produce a work of literary merit, the memory of which may linger long after the title or the characters' names and genders have been forgotten.

Overlapping with racism, sexism, handicapism, and ageism, but going beyond these 'isms' to discuss with disarming frankness a wide variety of subject matter, is a composite category which may be labeled the new realism. This new realism, in its liberal approach to books for the young, dramatically reflects society's changing attitude toward both children and literature. It also mirrors the popular culture and the values of a society in ferment. Birth and death, conception and abortion, marriage and divorce, and homosexual and heterosexual activity, are all among the subject matter. The new realism looks at life in all its diversity; it exposes the seamy, the sordid, and the sadistic; it admits that birth is a natural physical process; it allows people to die by unnatural as well as natural causes; it acknowledges the existence of human sexuality and treats it as a subject of interest and importance to young people. Considering the scope and nature of

this category, it is not surprising that it has been the focus of considerable critical commentary and not a little controversy. The criticism centers mainly around the honesty of the realism, the appropriateness of the themes and subject matters, and the manner of the presentation.

The criticism provides no easy answers to the complex questions associated with the new realism, but there emerges quite clearly a strong critical position which holds that, in the exploration of contemporary social issues, a concern for realism, relevance, and topicality must never replace that concern for literary excellence which must remain an author's primary goal. The critics demand honest presentation of the realities of life and death; they approve of the expansion of the subject matter to include all topics which are related to children's development and experience; they insist upon a sensitive, dignified, and honest depiction of the same. They identify as pitfalls for authors of realism the mistaking of the stereotype for the real, the superficial for the substance, the message for the art.

Central to the controversy which has surrounded the new realism has been the frank and open discussion of matters pertaining to human sexuality. While some critics maintain that the author cannot present the 'real' and the 'true' if countless taboos must be respected, there are those who challenge both the appropriateness of the subject matter in the new realism, and the honesty of the presentation.

The viewpoint of those who have misgivings about the appropriateness of matters pertaining to human sexuality as suitable subject matter for children's books, is most effectively presented by Josette Frank (1973). She is particularly concerned that books dealing candidly with sexual activities reach down in readability to ten-year-olds. She

suggests that it may well be time to pause and assess what is happening. The question, she believes, is one of benefit rather than harm, and "benefit can come in the form of information, emotional satisfaction, escape, expanded horizons, or just plain fun." (p. 169) In determining the acceptability of books of high sexual content, Frank would apply the criteria of integrity of purpose, authority, moral and social validity, and the resolutions they offer. She admits that her concern is that children be protected from "unnecessary, premature, unhealthy sexual stimulation, beyond their present maturity and capacity to manage." (p. 170) Frank's dilemma of how much? and when? is shared by many of those who must make decisions about books of the new realism. Perhaps, more important, is the unanswered question - unanswered, at least, for this writer - why?

In Talent is Not Enough (1975), Hunter addresses some of the problems related to the "new realism." Those problems arising from the new freedom which contemporary society allows the writer of children's books, will not be solved by talent and technique alone, Hunter believes, but by talent and technique compounded with what she calls "the convention of care." This "convention of care," which involves the author's sensitivity to subject and audience, must operate strongly in the prepubertal years. Unless such care is exercised, she says:

> the law of diminishing return is immediately activated, and the writer will only succeed in rubbing his young reader's nose in the dirt of the world before the same child has had a chance to realize that the world itself is a shining star.
>
> (p. 22)

With reference to much of the subject matter which appears to preoccupy many of the writers of contemporary realistic fiction, Hunter says, "You can't make literature out of pigs' swill," and in similar

vein, Egoff, speaking recently at a Conference on Children's Literature in Columbus, Ohio, observed that much of the new realism should be given a Dewey Number to classify it, for whatever it is, literature it is not.

While it is generally agreed that it is the treatment of the subject matter rather than the subject matter itself which determines the merit of a work, the critics deny that serious social problems may be solved as simplistically as some authors seem to suggest. While it is generally agreed that all matters concerning human existence may be fit subjects for exploration, it is the author's vision which may transform into literature what might otherwise be mere social gossip. Authors should have neither their subject matter nor their language prescribed, but the freedom to explore and create should not be confused with license to falsify, distort, or exploit. Nor should a writer's attempt to evoke themes once considered taboo be construed as artistic achievement. Exploration of the sensational, the shocking, or the titillating cheapens both life and literature. The best books, whatever the subject matter, will illuminate what it is like to be truly human and will, as Karl (1970) maintains, recognize the common humanity of us all.

Violence, both physical and psychological, is so much a part of the society in which children live that to ignore it in their literature is as unnatural as it is unrealistic. The prevailing critical position emerging from the body of opinion examined is that violence, which may be a constructive as well as a destructive force, is a natural and appropriate subject for children's books; that, indeed, a sensitive exploration of this subject may assist children in understanding

something of the nature of violence as a force which works within the individual as well as in society at large. Any suggestion that books which deal with violence are likely to incite readers to acts of violence is denied by the critics, the counter argument being that the abhorrence which results from seeing raw violence in action is likely to have a positive rather than a negative effect on social behaviour. There is also a strong consensus that the depiction of violence through literature may have a cathartic effect through the 'purging' of the reader's emotions. The critics all agree that it is the treatment of the violence rather than the violence itself which is harmful, and there is agreement that violence which is used realistically to portray an authentic experience or a part of an exercise in justice, is appropriate. Violence used honestly in the service of art is acceptable; violence used gratuitously for the exploitation of either subject or reader is repellent. The critical principles governing the treatment of violence in children's books, once it has been introduced, dictate that the setting permit children the option of psychological distancing; that the violence be resolved in some satisfactory manner; and that the author, by some indication of disagreement or disapproval of anti-social behaviour, ensure the preservation of the moral order of the universe.

For more than a decade, now, society has been increasingly concerned about the importance of maintaining the balance of nature and preserving the natural environment. Conservation, pollution, environmental control, and ecology have become household words. Any issue which has been the focus of such social concern and public outcry is bound to be explored in books for children. During the decade under

study, there has been a spate of juvenile books on ecological concerns. At the beginning of the decade, Katherine Heylman (1970) commented:

> The truism that children's literature is a sensitive mirror reflecting contemporary concerns and values is certainly borne out by the number of juvenile books that have appeared recently about our environmental crises.
>
> (p. 44)

Eight years later, Jane Resh Thomas (1978) reflected:

> The ecology bandwagon is full of materialists who know when a spiritual theme has inspired mass loyalty, and publishers have rushed in to fill a marketing vacuum... No one would criticize the high purpose of those who want to teach children to take care of the world; but there are stridency and sanctimony in some of the books that sound like religious fervour and intolerance of deviation from the true faith. The result is a simplistic view which distorts the truth and serves neither ideology nor children.
>
> (p. 24)

The primary concern in books on ecology, as with books on other social issues, is that they qualify as literature when assessed by standards of literary excellence. The critical question is whether the author's intention is to create a work of art and thereby to entertain and delight, or to preach anti-litter or conservation sermonettes and thereby to instruct and precipitate action. When the author is successful in using the social issue in the service of art, and the ecology theme arises naturally from a well-told story, then the medium may indeed become an effective message. Picture books, fiction, and non-fiction are all important in the exploration of such themes, and always the 'message' should evolve naturally from the story. Books on ecological themes should contain concepts which are within the emotional and intellectual grasp of the intended reader, and the required action should be within the reader's control. In non-fiction the information should be both current and accurate, and in all books, what-

ever the format, there should be room for both sides of a problem, and the author's approach should be positive - an affirmation of the affinity between man and nature and of the individual's responsibility for involvement in the protection and preservation of the universe. It should be noted, also, that while ecological themes may be and often are overtly explored, subtle truths related to the same are communicated in many books of excellence where the relationship between the human and the environment is sensitively and sympathetically affirmed.

Now to return to the category of issues-centred criticism of which sexism, the new realism, violence, and environmental control were sub-categories, it should be noted that the unifying principle of all the issues-centred criticism is that any acceptable presentation of social issues through the medium of literature must have all such issues used in the service of art, and developing naturally within the context of a well-structured narrative. The prevailing critical opinion is that when emphasis in either writing or criticism moves from concern with the unity of the whole as a work of art to concern for issues alone, both the work and the criticism have moved out of the realm of literature.

RELATED FINDINGS

1. The criticism of children's literature in the past decade appears to reflect a move away from total preoccupation with the work itself, toward a more comprehensive approach which is concerned as well with the developmental characteristics of children and the honest and artistic presentation of social issues. A critical opinion is developing which emphasizes the importance of finding

the fit between reader and tale. A work of art cannot be completely divorced from its communicative power, and the communicative power of children's literature is inextricably linked to the capacity of children to respond. This, of course, is not a new concept. I.A. Richards (1924), for example, was concerned with the "wholeness" of critical judgment and M.H. Abrams (1953) saw artist, work, audience and universe as being interrelated.

2. From all three categories of criticism - work-centred, child-centred, and issues-centred - emerge critical principles which may provide valuable guidelines for both the writing and the evaluation of books for children. Although there has not been time to examine them in this presentation, these principles, I believe, are deserving of careful study.

3. While much of children's literature is well served by the existing criticism, there are some areas which have received only superficial treatment. The literature of the oral tradition, for example, is in need of a strong and confident criticism to preserve the spirit and flavour of the past from the onslaught of mass production and mediocrity. The criticism of the picture book often fails to take into account its dual nature, few critics being equally competent in both literature and art. Criticism of poetry suffers because many of the critics are reluctant to say what poetry is. Critics of the new realism do not always appear to recognize a trend toward the exploration of the superficially relevant, the topical and the sensational; nor do they insist that realism include much wider subject matter than that of the 'new realism' which appears to be absorbing most of the attention.

4. The individuals whose judgements have formed the bases of this study are informed professionals whose collective viewpoint effectively describes the present state of the art of children's literature, and offers guidelines for the direction of that literature in the next decade. The professions represented by the 350 'critics' included authors; university professors in departments of education, library science, and English; editors and publishers; professional critics; teachers; and librarians. Included also were representatives of University departments of art, history and psychology. The list included many whose names will be immediately recognized as individuals who themselves have made outstanding contributions to children's literature. Many are parents with an intimate knowledge of children. All of them were once children and most of them appear to remember the experience.
5. Because I am now speaking to a Canadian audience and members of the Canadian Council of Teachers of English, I feel compelled to say that, of the criticism surveyed for this study, only a very minimal amount appeared in Canadian sources or dealt with Canadian materials. This, it appears to me, should be a matter of grave concern for all of us. Canadian children's books must be judged by universal standards. To suggest otherwise would be shortsighted indeed, and would do a grave disservice to Canadian children's literature and to Canadian children.

CONCLUSION

Whatever may have been the case in 1971, the fact is that today there is a valid criticism of children's literature - a criticism

which appears to be moving away from a narrow preoccupation with text toward a more comprehensive criticism which embraces the author, the work, the social environment in which the work develops, and the audience to whom the work is addressed. This criticism is concerned with the continuing search for standards and the importance of making books of excellence accessible to the many as well as the few. In a distinctive children's literature there is a uniqueness which relates to the nature of children. The individual works are literary, however, and it must remain the responsibility of the critics, whatever form their response to children's books may take, to preserve both those qualities which are literary and those which are childlike. It is also their responsibility to insist that there is no place in children's literature for the condescending, the childish or the unliterary. It is important, as well, that the critical opinions espoused by those who bring wisdom and discernment to the assessment of children's literature be communicated to all who are directly involved in bringing children and books together. Critics who talk only to each other will render little service to literature, children or criticism.

The fond grandmother in the opening incident was looking for a "really good" book for a particular child. It is unlikely that she thought of herself as a critic, and she may never have heard of Walter de la Mare, but in some vague way she believed that "only the rarest kind of best in anything is good enough for children." She was engaged in her own personal search for excellence, and all of us who seriously seek to bring children and good books together must do likewise. All valid criticism will help to chart the way.

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